



National Multiple Sclerosis Society
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**Testimony in Support of
2011-2012 Low Income Energy Assistance Program
Appropriations, Energy & Technology, and Human Services Committees
Public Hearing, September 27, 2011**

Senator Harp, Representative Walker, Senator Fonfara, Representative Nardello, Senator Musto, Representative Tercyak and members of the Appropriations, Energy and Human Services Committees,

My name is Susan Raimondo and I am the Senior Director of Advocacy and Programs for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Connecticut Chapter. The National MS Society has offices in Hartford and Norwalk. We serve over 6,000 individuals living with multiple sclerosis and their families in Connecticut.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. We want to thank your committees for their ongoing support of our legislative priorities including access to year round energy assistance for cooling costs.

We are here today to urge the Appropriations, Energy and Technology and Human Services Committee to make changes to **insure that last year's levels of energy assistance will be available this winter.** We are very concerned about the Governor's proposal to restrict LIHEAP to individuals who only have deliverable fuel and that have incomes less than 150% of the federal poverty level. These changes will have a horrific impact on Connecticut's residents throughout the year, not just during the winter.

Specifically for individuals with MS, access to year-round energy assistance is critical because individuals can suffer from severe heat sensitivity. Heat aggravates MS symptoms in over 80% of patients. Increased fatigue, weakness and visual disturbances are just a few of the problems that may occur when the body's temperature rises. We are already seeing increases in the number of requests for assistance from our members.

Our understanding is that if the committees adopt the proposed Block Grant, this will mean

- massive spring utility shut-offs, endangering the lives and well-being of many low income households and creating significant new burdens with disparate impact on urban areas;
- endangers well over \$60 million in non-governmental benefits provided through the utility companies, that make utility bills more affordable for the poor;

- reduced access to weatherization assistance, with increased risk that federal stimulus funding for badly needed low income weatherization will have to be returned to the federal government;
- undoing years of successful efforts between utility companies and social service providers to create affordable payment programs and a network to make these plans readily accessible to low income households.

The National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Connecticut Chapter provides financial assistance for individuals with multiple sclerosis and their families who are struggling with the financial costs of living with this devastating, disabling unpredictable chronic illness. We assist individuals seeking assistance with a variety of services or items including medical equipment, transportation and utility bills.

The number of individuals in our financial assistance program has grown by sixty-nine percent in 2011. We assisted 140 families in 2010. During the past fiscal year, October 1, 2010 – today, we have helped 204 individuals with MS and their families.

In the past year, forty-three percent of the requests are for utility assistance. Our program involves more than merely paying a bill, our staff works tirelessly to provide assistance and empowerment with these individuals to maximize any type of utility company assistance. The families in our program are often facing shut offs of electricity or natural gas.

Please adopt the Low Income Energy Advisory Board's (LIEAB) recommendations instead of the block grant proposal. The Low Income Energy Board Proposes to:

- Maintain energy assistance for utility heated households and renters up to 60% SMI
- Maintain last winter's program structure and income eligibility levels, with a three-tiered benefit schedule. Allows the program to modify benefits based on actual federal and potential state-appropriated funds. This means the plan would include benefits for households with income up to 60% SMI, provides benefits regardless of heating sources and includes a benefit for renters.
- Follow last winter's program time table for benefits (fuel delivery period: Nov. 1 to and mid-March) and application deadlines (Nov. 1 through beginning of May, extended to mid-May for utility heated households with a shut-off notice).
- Commit state funds to:
 - Ensure adequate administrative funding for Community Action Agencies and other qualified entities to administer the program; and
 - Supplement federal funds available for energy assistance benefits.

Thank you again.

Susan Raimondo

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